GOD HAS MANY NAMES:

V. LOVER AND FRIEND

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Scripture

Isaiah 40:1-5, 11
1 John 4:7-12

"Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."
1 John 4:8 (NRSV)

"...For God is Love"

Richard Selzer, a surgeon, tells about operating on a young woman for a malignant growth on her cheek. It was necessary, in the process of the operation, to cut the nerve which controlled the muscles of her mouth. When she looked in the mirror and saw her mouth, she asked the doctor if it would always look like that. He said yes. She began to weep, until her young husband knelt down beside her, looked at her and said, "I like it," and he kissed her. Dr. Selzer wrote: "I felt as if I was in the presence of God"... [Gracia Grindal, "Preaching the Word in Good and True Words," Context, Martin Marty, 11/15/90] and the point of this sermon is that he, in a sense, was.

What you call God is important. What you call anything has a way of causing the name to be self-fulfilling. Furthermore, what you call people always has a way of influencing your behavior toward them and their response to your behavior.

Naming anything is a powerful and important gesture. Sometimes when we want to change our behavior, the first thing we do is change our vocabulary. In a relatively short period of time we have changed in the way we refer to racial/ethnic minorities and while we are not there yet, the change in language has indicated a steady change in attitude.

So, what you call your God is important.

God actually has many names because the only real name our God has is not a name at all. Rather it is a peculiar sequence of Hebrew consonants, pronounced "Yahweh," and the only adequate translation is, "I am." When Moses asks for God's name, that is the answer he gets. "Yahweh. I am who I am." Some translate it "I will be who I will be." And it has been suggested that this is the peculiar genius of Biblical religion: a God who has no single name like Zeus, or Baal or Jupiter, the Fertility God or the War God or Sun God. God's name in the Bible is a form of the "be" verb

which really means God is at the heart of all "being" but also that whoever is using it has to complete it out of his or her own experience.

And so God has many names. "I am your creator" is one of them. "I am your provider" is another. "I am your father: I will be the one who runs down the road to welcome you home when you are lost in a far country. I will be your mother, who lovingly nurtures you and who can no more forget you than a nursing mother can forget the infant at her breast. I will be your liberator. I will be there when you are in captivity. I will hear your cries, and I will come to set you free from whatever is hemming you in and holding you down, your guilt, your grief, your fear, your despair."

Names are powerful because they not only define, they also limit whatever we are naming. Every name limits God. Every name of God limits the unfathomable mystery of the one who cannot be comprehended. So it is important, Biblically speaking, to acknowledge that no single name begins to approach the reality of God. Likewise it is important to understand and acknowledge that if we have only one name for God, our relationship with God will be limited and inadequate and ultimately our one and only name for God will become an idol which is what is behind the Bible's wise reluctance to give God a real name. If the only name we have for God is Almighty Lord, we will miss some very important things the Bible says about God, namely that God is not always Almighty or Lordly, but sometimes vulnerable and caring. If the only name we have for God is Father, we will miss an important dimension of God which is maternal and feminine, a God who gathers the chicks under her wings, leans down to feed the young, comforts them in her bosom.

This morning: the God who is love - who befriends us...
Lover - Friend - two more of God's many names.

Why Lover? Isn't that a little risky? Yes. Unnecessarily provocative? Maybe. The tradition universally agrees that God is love: that the highest and holiest way to talk about God is in terms of the highest and best love we know.

"Love is from God: everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." [1 John 4:7,8] Everybody knows about agape - selfless love.

So God is love. What the tradition never says is that God is lover. The Judeo-Christian tradition "recoils" from that, says Vanderbilt theologian Sallie McFague, and in an important new book, Models of God, in which she explores new words and new ways of speaking about God, she urges a reexamination of that traditional position.

I found her argument intriguing. We have said that God is love, a philosophic abstraction; and we have not been comfortable calling God either Lover or Friend, for two reasons, both of them having more to do with the Greek culture in which early Christian thought was shaped than with the Bible. If love has something to do with sex, which it often does, we have assumed that whatever we mean by God as love, it can't be that! In fact, we are fairly suspicious of human sexuality as an expression of the goodness of creation.

The early Christian church bought into the Greek notion that life could be divided into two realms: the spiritual and the material; the good and the evil. Human sexuality, as an expression of the physical, or inferior dimension of reality, was thought to be innately corrupted, to be denied, avoided, or at least engaged in without joy by those who valued their spirituality. Any notion of God as lover bumps into two thousand years of tradition that celebrates virginity and celibacy as lofty ideals and continues to define sexuality as a means for propagating the race.

But that's not the real problem with the notion of God as lover. The real problem is it's too close; a lover has needs, passion and enjoys the responsiveness of the beloved.

The theological tradition, based on the Greek notion of the two values - spirit and flesh - favors a radically transcendent God, distant, impersonal, who - being God - has no needs. The "unmoved mover" philosophy calls God sometimes.

"Apatheia," the Greeks said, is God's main characteristic from which we get our word apathy: no passion, no great love, no need, no desire, but a kind of splendid isolated detachment.

The Biblical tradition, by contrast, takes a very different position. Our God is not a transcendent abstraction, but the God of Abraham and Sarah. Our God is not the unmoved mover, but one who is moved by the cries of captive people and goes down to Egypt to set them free. Our God is not isolated and uncaring, but precisely the opposite, a God whose heart is warmed by human love, a God whose heart is broken by human unfaithfulness, who gets angry at human injustice, a God who shows up on the side of those who need help, a God who leads the homeless exiles across the desert, a good shepherd God who leads us beside still waters and fills our cup to overflowing and who walks ahead of us even in the "valley of the shadow of death." A God who weeps and laughs, a God who dances joyfully to the music of the creation.

The <u>most</u> important thing the Christian religion has to say to us this morning is that God is a lover and a friend: that God has a passion for this world, a deep and enduring love for the creation and for all people; that God has needs, is vulnerable, rejoices and is glad; that God wants the loving response of everyone of us; that our response to God's love is pleasing to God. God delights in us. Our love "rejoices the heart of God."

The <u>most</u> important and most powerful thing the Christian religion has to say to each of us is that God will be one who loves us, one who is a friend to us.

What does that mean theologically? We know what it means personally: the fact is that we never feel better than when we are loved. There is scientific data that suggests that being in love stimulates the immune system and reduces the level of lactic acid in the blood and consequently reduces the feeling of being tired. People who know they are loved are literally more alive. Not that you particularly need laboratory

data if you are in the blissful state, or ever have been. And if you were fortunate enough to see Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn in "Foxfire" last night, you know that the energizing, life-giving power of love is not confined to the young.

The crux of being in love is not sex, McFague suggests, but value. "It is finding someone else valuable and being found valuable." She writes elegantly:

> "Lovers love each other for no reason or beyond all reason: they find each other valuable just because the other person is who he or she is. Being found valuable in this way is the most complete affirmation possible. It says, 'I love you just because you are you. I delight in your presence, you are precious beyond all saying to me.'"

And here, I think, is the crux and the good news. "In the eyes of the beloved, one sees a different image of oneself: one sees a valuable person. Perhaps for the first time in one's life one realizes that one might be loveable: to see with the lover's vision is to see oneself as loveable." [Ibid. p. 128]

Now the simple truth is that not all of us know that. Perhaps none of us knows that ultimately. Some people have been in love many times and never feel valued. Some people have made themselves vulnerable in love, were exploited, used, dropped and feel very specifically not valued. Some people are not now loved by anyone else. Some people are married and don't feel valued or loveable and worth anything. The truth is that we are not talking merely about the magic experience which can happen between two people. The truth is that we are here talking about something which is close to the heart and soul of each one of us regardless of the state of our romantic relationships.

I attended a seminar recently led by Craig Dykstra, a Presbyterian educator who heads the religion division of the Lilly Foundation. We were talking about what Christianity has to say to the kinds of people who attend urban Presbyterian Churches like this one, and of course every one of the ministers around the table was himself/herself one of those people, so the conversation was not theoretical. I had just read Dr. Barry Brazelton's article in the New York Times Magazine about "Why We Are Failing Our Children," and his dramatic story about a newborn addicted to crack. Addicted babies, he said, are hard to love; they are not attractive and cuddly; they are either limp and unresponsive, or hypertensive and behave chaotically. They have difficulty receiving or responding to the stimuli of a soothing voice or face. When they are cuddled or rocked, they react with piercing wails and jerky motions. He wrote about a little girl, unattractive, out of control, face contorted, unable to focus visually on anything and therefore about to be diagnosed as having permanent brain damage, and how he literally forced her to suck her fist and held a bright red ball in front of her for a very long time until she focused and relaxed and her face brightened and she followed him with her eyes.

I had just read that and used it in a sermon and what Dykstra said that got to me about the Gospel of Christ was this:

> "What keeps us alive? What is it without we cannot live? Being loved... Someone else thinking my life means something even when I don't... Infants will shrivel up and die unless they recognize a face. We spend our lives looking for a face that will recognize us, love us. We need to know we are loved in order to be."

"I am who I am. I am the one who loves you when no one else does. I am your friend when you are alone."

A former colleague of mine who knew I was working on this topic sent me an essay. A woman was trying to pray and trying to use different names for God.

> "My mind kept wandering... suddenly the word 'friend' floated into my ears. No, I didn't hear a voice but the word still seemed to loom there in my consciousness as if it had just been dropped into my head. As I focused on the word 'friend' I was surprisingly filled with emotion and tears streamed from my eyes. My thoughts went, 'Yes, that's it. I am friendless. I need a friend. I haven't had a friend in almost twenty years. I've actually been wishing for a friend for months. Could I possibly call God "Friend?" Would calling God friend instead of God finally make God seem alive and real to me?' It seemed feasible. It seemed that in my most alone times, night and day, that I might be able to call that name - Friend - and feel some presence was listening. It seemed like a break-through.'"

"I am who I am. I am your friend..."

Most of us are rationalists rather than mystics. Our approach to God is by way of rational proposition but there is a lovely strain of mysticism in the Christian tradition. Its focus is not on doctrine but on personal spirituality. It is concerned more with prayer and meditation and the individual's relationship with God than it is with the niceties of theological orthodoxy.

Julian of Norwich was a mystic. She shocked her 13th century contemporaries by calling God "our mother." Bernard of Clairvaux lived a century before her. He wrote the words of some of our most beloved hymns. "Jesus Thou Joy of Loving Hearts," "Jesus the Very Thought of Thee." Reflecting on the Song of Solomon as a metaphor for God's relationship with the world, Bernard wrote, "Jesus is God's kiss." And I know a modern mystic, who is confined to a wheelchair and who wrote this prayer and shared it with me. It is very personal, but it is within the great tradition of Christian mysticism.

"O God, your love is unpredictable and catches us off guard. We blush at your unexpected kisses. Our knees are weakened when we are embraced in your warm and gentle hugs. Our smiles and appreciation are spontaneous. You have more than flattered us and endeared us to you."

Now I don't know how much hugging and kissing is going on in his life, so I conclude he's talking about something very profound, about a God whose love for us is real: who delights in us, who values us, and in whose love we see a new vision of ourselves.

It is, I think, what is going on in this lovely season, even when we do not have words for it. Somehow it gets through all the hype and noise and frenzied shopping. We are loved and valued.

I think it is the music in the air, the combined resonances of "Messiah," "Joy to the World," and "Chestnuts Roasting On An Open Fire." There is a face that recognizes us and likes and cares for us.

It is, I think, the universal goodness of Christmas. We are, each of us, all of us, valued and loved by the one who made us, the one who provides for us, the one who has been mother and father and friend to us, the lover to whom our only response can be to love in return, to love the world passionately, to love the loveless and needy, to love those dearest to us, and hold tightly to them, to love one another.

"For God is love. God's love was revealed to us in this way. God sent his only son into the world so that we might live through him."

Thanks be to God.

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You have many names, O God. You are above and beyond our naming. In this busy and blessed season, give us moments of silence to reflect on the mystery of your love for us.

O God, in this birth we are loved and befriended. And for that we give you thanks. Amen.